Last of Whalebone Artisans Closes His Quaint Workshop

George Messmann Retires After Fifty-six Years Because His Picturesque Trade No Longer Pays

THERE are a few details of persons and things lacking, but the closing down of the quaint little workroom for the manufacture of whalebone, which has been going on for a hundred years or more in an old building on Duane street, has about it some of the features of regret and sadness which Dickens paints so vividly in "Dombey and Son" of the breakup of the ancient shop of "Walter's uncle." We may proudly ruffle ourselves when we talk of progress, but some of us do feel sorrow when the little, picturesque and individual concerns of business are ground under its wheels.

On February 8, 1864, a boy, born in Willett street fifteen years prior to that date and just out of the Chrystie Grammar School, answered in person an advertisement put in the *Staats-Zeitung* by William Forster calling for a boy to learn the business of manufacturing whalebone at 161 Duane street. The boy got the job, and there, at an ancient table surrounded by ancient desk, safe, clock, file of old books, slabs of carved whalebone and all the paraphernalia of an old time trade, he has worked ever since—until June 1, just passed, the date on which he doffed his apron for the last time. Seventy-one years old as he is, his age is not the reason for shutting up the shop; in modern competition and the drying up of its sources the business of manufacturing whalebone no longer yields even a modest living.

Why He Quit.

"I could go on," said George Messmann, which is the name of that boy who answered Forster's "ad" fifty-six years ago; "there is nothing the matter with me. I'm as well as anybody could be who has never taken a pill or medicine of any kind in all his life. I could keep on and keep good time, too, exactly as that old clock on the wall has kept on ticking all the years I've been here. Twice in its long life, and as it was Forster's clock before me I don't know how long that is, the clock has stopped. But I took the works out and steamed 'em, put 'em back and on it has gone again.

"I could steam up, too, but see no use in it. So I retire from the whalebone business. I am the oldest and last cutter of whalebone in the United States. The business has died out on account of the many substitutes for whalebone that have been put on the market; none of them really take its place, but the customer apparently had as lief wear a corset steel as a corset whalebone (they call the substitute 'whalebone'), and there is no demand or very little for the real article to be used in hats, hoopskirts, dress linings, &c., while the automobile has caused a large depreciation on sales of whalebone for whips. You don't need a whip for an auto. I have cut and sold from 10,000 to 30,000 pounds of whalebone for whips in one year in my time; now not a pound. I used to make an enormous quantity of surgical instruments of whalebone, now they can be made of rubber; I used to employ twenty-five cutters; the last season I have hardly had use for two cutters; up to four years ago we kept going largely by making a fine wire to be used in the loom for picot edged and embroidered ribbons by manufacturers, but that has now dwindled to practically nothing.

"Worst of all is the fact that nobody can get raw whalebone now except through a trust and immediately none is available and won't be until next fall. It all comes from San Francisco and Seattle, very little from New Bedford, and the bulk of it is exported. Europe still wants real whalebone, America doesn't.

Establishes Ye Olde Tavern.

"The Pacific Whale Company drove us little fellows out of business. It was founded in 1899, and everybody advised me to quit then. But I wouldn't; I was obstinate. In order to live and keep my little shop going I moved the old desk, work tables, safe, one of the first of the Herring variety, upstairs and fitted up the first floor of this building, which I own, as Ye Olde Tavern. It proved a success; the college boys found it out and used to hold their little dinners and reunions there. Many a good song and much good fellowship rang out and warmed Ye Olde Tavern. But that's gone now and I guess you know why.

"On the 10th of February, 1914, I celebrated my fiftieth year in business by giving a little dinner. I had almost made up my mind to quit then. The editor of the *Journal of Commerce*, John W. Dodworth, sent me this letter on that anniversary: 'Please to accept our hearty congratulations on the completion of your fiftieth anniversary. Such an event is certainly interesting and suggestive. If there were more like yourself, who took pride in long and faithful service, it would tend to strengthen our national stability and prove that real success cannot be measured by the gold standard.'"

With a flush of pride on his cheek the old whalebone cutter read his letter aloud and then pulled out of a package of ancient papers a yellowed notice of the sale of the business by William Forster to A. J. Vetter, "who has been with me for 24 years, and who will continue the business at the old stand," and a quarter of a century later, or on May 1, 1890, a similar document, in fact an identical document, set forth that A. J. Vetter had sold the business to his foreman, George Messmann, "for thirty years, according to this evidence the last proprietor has been in complete control.

GEORGE MESSMANN, LAST of THE WHALEBONE MANUFACTURERS, WHO HAS CLOSED HIS OLD SHOP at 161 DUANE ST.

"We never changed any of the good old ways here," said Mr. Messmann. "We have always burned gas and never had a telephone. We've had twenty-five workmen and could keep 'em busy working every day except Sunday from 7:30 A. M. to 5:30 P. M., with a half hour at noon. We never had a strike nor any difficulty in the workshop, unless you call my having to order my men away to take a holiday a difficulty. We handled great quantities of whalebone slats; formerly we could buy these for $2 a pound. It went up to $3 in 1864 and has gone on climbing every year since until now the price is $6 a pound. You know, I suppose, that only the right whale furnishes whalebone. It is found in the top of the mouth and comes from 3 to 12 feet long. The sperm whale, which is taken for oil, has no whalebone in its mouth, only teeth.

"Occasionally when the slabs of whalebone reach us we find that the sailors on the whaling vessels have occupied their leisure in carving or engraving whaling scenes on them. That does not hurt the commercial value of the slab, but one of these works of art was really so good that I've always kept it. There it hangs on the wall."

The whalebone manufacturer took down the sword shaped slab and exhibited the scenes engraved on it. There were the full masted whaler, the whale spouting, the harpooner in a small boat being driven by a bank of oars against the monster, a boat being crushed by a flip of the great tail with the sailors spilling out of it—in a word, all the scenes of danger and excitement that attend a voyage after leviathan. It was excellently done and Mr. Messmann is to be congratulated in keeping it intact.

Began at $2 a Week.

"For a couple of years," said he, "while I was earning $2 a week with Mr. Forster, I was set to counting tiny rods of whalebone that were used in hats where the rim joins the crown. These rods were known as 'sweats,' and Forster did a big business in them. That's gone out, and I don't know what is used for the purpose now, if anything. I counted gross after gross, up to the millions, before I was permitted to try my 'prentice hand at cutting and scraping whalebone. It would surprise you to know how much hand work is required in this business. Nearly every article of whalebone has to be put by hand through three or four processes.

"I worked for Mr. Vetter twenty-five years, and long before that I knew everything that was to be learned about the whalebone manufacturing. Then I bought him out, and shortly after that the Pacific Steam Whaling Company of San Francisco, which had been our chief source of supply for the right whale of Arctic waters, got into the business, as I've told you. Five of my good, loyal customers stuck by me, and for a time I managed to do a pretty good business. An instance of how these very firms have finally lost interest is shown by this box full of white whalebone."

He took out a box of beautiful bones, about the length formerly used in dress waists, that were of the color of old ivory.

"White bone isn't the product of any particular whale, as some people mistakenly think; it is the streaked part of the upper jaw of the whale and has to be cut out with a great deal of care. It is expensive stuff, but there were until lately a few old fashioned ladies who always asked for it to use in their gowns. I have had this white bone a couple of years now and when I offer it to my old customers they don't even take the trouble to reply, which shows that the demand is utterly dead.

"Occasionally I have had in my career an opportunity to buy whalebone before it had been taken out of the whale's mouth. I have made trips to New Bedford to purchase short bone and once I lost a chance when a whale was cast up at Amagansett. I reached there just too late to make a deal. Another time I got a big deal of whalebone through by being in time and on the spot with ready money. That was a few years ago when a whale was cast up at Westhampton, L. I. There was wild bidding for the bone, but I had taken the precaution to have money with me and my bid, while not the largest, won because I could show the fishermen the greenbacks.

"Yes, there has been some excitement and a little advanture in the whale cutting business. I would like to go on with it to the end and I know that I am going to be terribly lonesome when I stop coming down to the old workroom, but it seems the only way left, for they have taken the business away."

The OLD WHALEBONE FACTORY AT 161 DUANE STREET ABOUT to BE SHUT DOWN, SHOWING The LAST REMAINING WORKMAN

Goddard Rivals Jules Verne in Plan For Sending a Rocket to the Moon

WILL Worcester be the scene in July for another act or incident of that thrilling drama in the history of the world—the romance of modern invention? Already bulletins are being issued by the National Geographic Society and other scientific organizations calling the attention of the public to the plans of Prof. Robert H. Goddard of Clark University to send a rocket to the moon—plans which once again recall the prophetic writings of Jules Verne, who, many years ago, pictured that imaginary trip "From the Earth to the Moon in 97 Hours."

Although Dr. Goddard has at present no intention of making a rocket which will carry a passenger, he has already had fifteen letters of application from persons who offer themselves as volunteers for a trip to the moon. The applicants are of a variety of types, some of them apparently "freaks," others young men of adventurous spirit, and others are women. One man wrote that he did not care whether or not the rocket could make a return trip. Apparently the idea of being shot off into the eternity of space and time in a projectile bound for the moon appealed to his imagination, minimizing the value of life on this sphere.

Visions Brought to Mind.

The very thought of Prof. Goddard's confident attempt to send his message out beyond the borders which have contained human endeavor in the past brings to mind two visions:

The great unexplored realms of the universe, upon which Jules Verne now might, starting from a scientific fact, build up a new fairyland of possibilities just as he so often did, and, on the other hand, the many true tales of the struggles, the discouragement and the disappointment of the inventors of the past. For if Verne, as the secretary of the French Academy so aptly expressed it in 1872, "replaced the well known wonders of fairyland by a new and more marvellous world, created from the most recent ideas of science," so also can the true stories of inventions be compared to the myths of fairyland, in which are to be found not only miraculous changes, spirits of unseen power, but dragons and ogres and Cinderellas, and the poverty and suffering through which heroes and heroines must fight their way before coming to the magic happy ending.

Prof. Goddard has now arrived at the point where lack of funds is the ogre threatening the success of his venture. It is a familiar ogre in the history of invention.

The two trials of the inventor are a sceptical world and an empty pocketbook. Only $1,200 of the fund subscribed for Dr. Goddard's work is now left to carry on his experiment. "I have tried out the rocket for a few successive charges," he said recently in telling of its present status, "and I found it to work. The physicists agree with me that it is in every way practicable. As it will go over a short range, so it will go over a long range. The only impediment now is that of funds. The first rocket will cost much more than any other, for we must continually experiment, making and discarding part after part until we have each one exactly right."

The general principle of the rocket is to have it propelled by a series of explosions. This has hitherto been deemed impossible because of the weight of the projecting mechanism, but Dr. Goddard has greatly decreased this weight by having the projecting mechanism drop off after it has done its duty.

Like many inventors, Dr. Goddard showed a tendency toward his future line of work while a boy. "When I was a youngster, a senior at Tech, twelve years ago, I wrote up the idea of sending a rocket to the moon by radium as a speculation," Dr. Goddard said, "estimating the amounts of radium required, and submitted it to certain scientific publications. The return of the article, with the usual reply except in the case of *Popular Astronomy*, was, at that time certainly, to have been expected."

In 1907 he wrote an article in which he set forth the theory of automatic balancing of airplanes by gyroscope and steering by banking and warping wings. This idea he thought of in 1909, wrote it up seven years later and sold it to a journal for $10, which was all he ever made from it. It was laughed at then as the wildest and most impossible scheme, but it has since been adopted and developed somewhat by manufacturers of airplanes. The only satisfaction the scientist now has from it is the realization that a former theory of his, held ridiculous at the time, has proved plausible and of practical value, and the hope that his present plans may eventually turn out equally well.

The Basic Idea.

Dr. Goddard states the basic idea of his present scheme in general terms as follows:

"Given a mass of explosive material of as great energy content as possible, what height can be reached if a large fraction of this material is shot downward, on exploding, with as high a speed as possible? It is evident, intuitively, that the height will be great if the fraction of material that remains is small and the velocity of the gases is high. Theory supports this conclusion.

"Incidentally it is worth mentioning that the rocket method is the only method of raising apparatus of any delicacy to great heights that is consistent with the known laws of mechanics and of common sense. A gun, in order not to produce an enormous force on the apparatus, would need to be of great length. Also matter and energy (as radiation pressure) are the only things that can be reacted against, relativity or no relativity.

"The most important of the immediate applications of the method is in providing a simple and, when sufficiently developed, inexpensive means of obtaining meteorological data at the 10 kilometer level. It is well recognized that this is the most important level for studying pressure, temperature, humidity and wind velocity; and for obtaining data soon after the ascent has been made is certainly of value in weather forecasting.

"At greater elevations the study of temperature, pressure, wind velocity and composition of the atmosphere is of scientific importance, as well as the study of the aurora, during the day as well as at night, and the radiations from the sun that are otherwise absorbed by the atmosphere.

Hitting the Moon.

"Concerning the possibility of hitting the moon with a rocket, it has been argued, granting that the projection to such a distance can be made, there will be so many disturbing influences when the rocket passes through the point of zero force between the earth and moon (it would never, of course, go exactly through this point) that it will be very unlikely to continue in the proper direction to make a hit. In this connection I have already called attention to the photosensitive cell as a means of automatically guiding an apparatus toward or near a luminous object; the object in this case being the illuminated crescent of the moon. The steering must, of course, be accomplished by jets which add the proper velocity perpendicularly to the direction of motion.

"There is no doubt that a mass of flash powder, even of the order of a few pounds, exploding on the surface of the moon, would be visible in a telescope of one foot aperture on the earth, and even more clearly visible in a telescope of larger aperture. Tubes containing capsules of Victor flash powder were used to test this point. These flashes were fired in Auburn on a fairly clear night and were observed in Worcester.

Continued on Sixth Page.

What the Nation Owes Haym Salomon

IT is unlikely that one person in a thousand has ever heard the name of Haym Salomon, a figure of importance in revolutionary times, yet one who has been strangely neglected in our annals. Haym Salomon was a Polish Jew, banker of New York and Philadelphia who financed and backed the new United States in their fight for self-government. His services have been ignored for nearly 150 years, his name, although appearing in encyclopædias and in President Madison's correspondence to Randolph and in Congressional records, also being mentioned in a few histories, is practically unknown.

Haym Salomon was born at Lissa, Poland, in 1740. He came to America in 1772 and was identified with the cause of American independence. In 1776 he was imprisoned by the British on a charge of espionage, and although a prisoner succeeded in stirring up sedition among Hessian officers. Two years later he escaped to Philadelphia, where he became an agent of Robert Morris and succeeded in obtaining large sums from Holland and France for the conduct of the American war. Salomon loaned Morris about $600,000 of his own money for the patriot cause, and at his death in 1785 $400,000 of this had not been returned. In addition he supplied funds to Jefferson, Madison, Randolph and other patriot leaders.

Haym Salomon died at the age of 45 in Philadelphia, leaving a widow and two small children. All his papers and the documents showing the Government's obligation were lost in the confusion following the occupation of Washington, D. C., by the British in 1814.

The United States has never recognized the services of this historic figure, although sporadic attempts have been made to use the accumulated interest on the debt still owed to Salomon's estate for some monument to his memory. American Jews are bringing up again the injustice to his memory and demanding of Congress the right to recognize and compensate the services of the great Jew. Their present plan is to use the interest and compound interest on the debt of the nation, said to amount to $150,000,000, or a part of it to erect a national university in Washington and name it the Haym Salomon National University; this to be the clearing house for all branches of human thought at present carried on by rich men's foundations, proclaimed as philanthropic work.

"It is proposed that this institution shall be carried on by the United States Government. A national university has been an ideal of our statesmen from the time of Washington, and ex-President Taft recently advocated in a speech at Cincinnati that one be established in the capital for post-graduate courses for American students.

The vision of the American Jews is a wide one that the advocated university to be founded in payment of money and gratitude to Haym Salomon will bring about a closer union between Asiatic, African, North, South, and Central American republics. They believe also that it would serve to settle the question, "What should be done with our ex-Presidents of the United States?" Ex-Presidents of the United States will be presidents and professors of this national university and do their part in standardizing culture in this country, unifying education in all the States and making of it a national unit.

To give at this late day the honorable page in our history the place that belongs to Haym Salomon by founding such an institution in his name a call to all intellectual persons of the United States has been issued by prominent Jews.